

Here comes the Sun

The Delhi Agenda, which kicked off the International Solar Alliance (ISA) on March 11, is a refreshing change in global environmental diplomacy. The agenda's 62 signatories agreed to increase the share of solar energy in their respective energy mix and the alliance plans to generate 1 TW of solar energy by 2030 — more than three times the current installed solar capacity, globally. The coalition will facilitate "joint research and development efforts" to reduce the cost of solar projects in member nations. This is a welcome departure from the times when deliberations over the transfer of climate-friendly technologies were hostage to the entrenched positions of the US, EU and developing countries. Developed countries like Australia and France partnering emerging economies like India and Brazil and small island nations like Fiji, Seychelles and Mauritius could be a potential game-changer for the renewable energy market. But therein also lies the alliance's main challenge: Balancing the needs and the vastly different capacities of its members would require the ISA to develop robust procedures.

At the core of the ISA is the understanding that the coming together of countries that get about 300 days of sunshine in a year will expand the global solar market, the bigger volumes will bring down costs, and this, in turn, will spur demand. But many of the countries have poor technological capabilities that could come in the way of their leveraging the platform. Even India, the club's founder, has struggled to be competitive in manufacturing solar equipment like photovoltaics. The country also requires technology to store solar energy when the sun is not shining. India could draw on its leadership of the alliance to find solutions to some of these problems. However, the alliance should also make sure that it does not become the means to advance the climate change mitigation goals of a few of its members or is reduced to an avenue of bilateral exchanges.

That the ISA has begun work less than two-and-a-half years after it was conceptualised at the Paris Climate Change Meet in 2015 is smooth procedural progress by the standards of global environmental diplomacy. But the alliance will now be faced with a different order of challenges. Many of its energy-deficient African members, for example, want the club to become a facilitator of their electrification programmes. For electricity-sufficient countries like Mauritius, membership of the alliance comes with an aspiration to transit to clean energy. The alliance will have to find ways to arbitrate between such claims on its resources. Mobilising finances will be another challenge — the alliance aims to pump in a trillion dollars into solar energy initiatives by 2030. These are early days for the ISA and its plans to deal with these challenges are understandably sketchy. Much will depend on the alliance's first assembly meeting next month when the ISA will frame its first set of rules.

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